Anyone who has taught an introductory ethics course or a professional ethics class has likely heard students writing off ethics and ethics instruction as unimportant, offering as evidence some type of moral relativism. Even if the instructor is sympathetic towards a particular version of moral relativism, students’ relativist claims can be disconcerting and can seriously detract from their willingness to learn the subject matter. A discussion of claims like “Morality is just a matter of opinion” or “It may be wrong for you but it’s not wrong for me” or “Other cultures have different morals than we do and we can’t judge them” is unavoidable in these courses. Despite my efforts to address variations of moral relativism at the beginning of a semester, I routinely found many of my students espousing virtually the same simplistic relativist views at the end of the term as they had at the beginning of the term. I would consistently receive final exam essays with statements like: “But this is all a matter of opinion” or “It’s really just up to the individual” or “There are really no right or wrong answers.” I began to wonder whether it was possible to teach students to be prepared to face ethical decisions in their future professions while demonstrating that ethical relativism is unconstructive.

In an effort to address this problem, and to facilitate achieving the goals for my professional ethics classes, I have crafted an approach to teaching professional ethics which borrows from critical thinking instruction, the recognition of multiple cultural identities, and cooperative learning pedagogical techniques. In this paper, I will discuss this combined pedagogical method, which I have found to be somewhat successful in mitigating the impact of moral relativism and even more successful as a means for achieving the important goal of equipping students with the tools for making reasoned ethical decisions in their future professional lives. I will begin with an overview of the particular problem of moral relativism along with a brief description of the university where I teach and
the students I instruct before turning to the combination of techniques that comprise the approach in question.

It is important to note that the method I am suggesting herein may not represent a radical departure from the way many ethics instructors approach professional ethics courses. But I would suggest that examining the goals for such instruction, considering how one might best achieve these goals, and confronting issues like student-reported moral relativism head-on, so to speak, are crucial tasks for teaching professional ethics and so deserve discussion.

I should also note at the outset that I will be discussing students’ statements of, and beliefs in, moral relativism in professional ethics courses. I would expect that the method discussed herein is also relevant to introductory ethics courses in general, but my experiences are exclusively from professional ethics courses and the goals and methods I will discuss were designed for professional ethics classes in particular.

**MORAL RELATIVISM AND ETHICAL DECISION MAKING**

I will not be offering a critique of moral relativist theories here. This has been done very well elsewhere. Suffice it to say that few ethicists are proponents of the moral relativist positions our students espouse. In addition, every ethics instructor with whom I have discussed the issue of student-reported relativism has grappled with the problem of how to handle such claims in their ethics classes. Rather than arguing against moral relativism, I will instead begin with the assumption that the moral relativist views espoused by most students are problematic and flawed positions and I will briefly argue that such moral relativist views are fundamentally detrimental to instruction in professional ethics, as these positions present roadblocks for both the serious study of ethical theories and real tolerance in the workplace.

But before we consider why moral relativism is counterproductive in teaching and learning professional ethics we should consider the following question: Why would otherwise reasonable students buy into moral relativism? I believe there are two substantive reasons. The first reason is that students seem to erroneously believe that tolerance of other cultures requires some kind of moral relativism. They feel that it is the only conclusion that can be drawn if one wants to be tolerant of the differing ethical claims of others, especially those from a “culture” other than one’s own. That students recognize tolerance as a good thing is commendable, however moral relativism neither follows from, nor is it required by, tol-
And supporting moral relativism isn’t particularly a good idea if one’s goal is to promote tolerance. If everyone should be tolerant, then at least this one moral claim is not relative.

The second reason, in my experience, that students espouse moral relativism is less lofty. From the students’ perspective, claiming that morality is relative seems to be a good reason for not comprehending difficult ethical theories or for coming to grips with contentious issues. If the rightness or wrongness of an action is just a matter of personal opinion (subjectivism) or if it depends on the way, or where, you were brought up (cultural relativism), then studying ethics is not very important. Clearly then, it is difficult to teach ethics or to explain ethical theories or principles on a substantive level to students who are convinced that “ethics is all relative.”

Assuming that these are the two common reasons students support moral relativism, and assuming that the latter reason is a motivation or frustration issue and can be dealt with through patient explanation of the importance of making ethical decisions, let’s return briefly to the issue of tolerance. Since cultural relativism is the version of moral relativism my students typically employ as their response to the worry of tolerance, it would be prudent to focus on cultural relativism in particular. I would argue that accepting cultural relativism out of a desire for tolerance is not just problematic, but actually somewhat dangerous. If an act is morally wrong just because the majority of those in a society say so then oppression rather than tolerance seems imminent. Disagreeing with the majority makes one morally wrong, by definition. Issues like civil disobedience, for example, are easily settled when the societal moral norms are clear, since deviation from the societal norms is unacceptable so such deviation is by definition immoral. The mantra would be “the majority rules.” The actions of those like Martin Luther King, Jr. in fighting for civil rights were morally wrong when they were committed since they violated the prevalent cultural norms at the time. This seems closer to intolerance than tolerance. The desire to respect the diverse opinions of others and be tolerant towards others, therefore, does not entail moral relativism. Instead, moral relativism appears to be at odds with any robust notion of tolerance. If morality is derived from the norms of a society, then that society can use those norms to oppress any who disagree, which I would argue is at odds with real tolerance.

But moral relativism is troubling for an ethics instructor in other ways. For example, in teaching professional ethics, I take it as one of my goals to empower my students to make reasonable decisions in situations
with ethical import like those they will face in their future professional lives. I would argue that students’ acceptance of moral relativism runs counter to this goal. Students who espouse subjectivism or cultural relativism and believe ethics is “just a matter of opinion” or “depends on your culture” will be poorly equipped for making ethical decisions in their future professional lives. Although many professions have a code of ethics, these codes, like any other set of rules, typically require interpretation and such codes cannot possibly cover every kind of decision that needs to be made by a professional. A professional facing a decision that falls outside of the code of ethics for their profession will be ill-equipped with allegiance to moral relativism, likely not possessing the necessary tools to make a reasoned, defensible decision. It is troubling to think of a future professional, especially one who is faced with a life and death decision, adopting a relativist stance towards their professional ethical decisions.

Even though simplistic moral relativist views are commonly quite popular at this time, the easy answers of “it’s all a matter of opinion” or “your culture determines right and wrong” cannot offer real answers in serious moral deliberation within a profession. As such, it seems clear that moral relativism should be dealt with in a professional ethics class, although the question of how to do so, which I will attempt to address in what follows, remains.

PROFESSIONAL ETHICS AND CULTURAL IDENTITY AT MY UNIVERSITY

I believe that I teach at a somewhat unique university. I teach at a branch of a large state-sponsored university where most students commute to campus. But this is not uncommon. What is somewhat unique about my university is that over 90% of the students are Latino/a (the university is designated as a Hispanic-Serving Institution or HSI) and a large number are bilingual. The university itself is very near the U.S./Mexico border, which has resulted in a culture that is a combination of Mexican-American, American, and Mexican influences. One of the key components of the approach I am proposing requires capitalizing on the ability of my students to understand and relate to more than one kind of cultural identity in addressing the problem of moral relativism.

As most of my students claim more than one cultural heritage, they seem to be in a unique position to identify and understand some of the ambiguities arising from cultural relativism towards ethics; namely, the problems of defining culture and of deciding to which culture to appeal
when determining the rightness or wrongness of an act. What I have discovered in teaching professional ethics at my university is that my students readily and easily propose and explain these ambiguities of cultural relativism when I allow them to discuss the implications of cultural relativism in cooperative learning base groups (which I will discuss in the next section). Perhaps the main reason they easily recognize this problem is that line-drawing is somewhat different for them. By this, I mean that in having ties to, and closely identifying with, more than one culture they don't draw lines as readily as many people do around a single culture or group of people.

In general, people seem to have a natural tendency to delineate or distinguish between individuals who have significant worth to them and individuals who do not. In many ways, this delineation allows us to determine which people will receive more serious moral consideration from us. We draw lines between our family members and friends as opposed to all other people, for example, but we also draw lines between those most “like us” and those who are quite different from us. In having strong ties to distinct groups of people or distinct cultures, my students are less likely to see these sharp dividing lines between different cultures, lines which would otherwise allow them to look to just one culture in identifying their own moral norms a la moral relativism. Stressing these ties to several distinct cultures seems to have allowed my students to at least recognize and appreciate some of the problems inherent in moral relativism. And perhaps my students are not that unique, after all. Most people in the U.S. can at least partially relate to more than one ethnic background or culture. Most people in the U.S. can tell you from whence their ancestors emigrated. Capitalizing on the diversity of backgrounds within a class of students at any university may serve the same purpose.

But this addresses only one part of the approach. Combining this focus on cultural identity with cooperative learning and critical thinking instruction is the overall project, to which I now turn.

**A DIFFERENT APPROACH**

In my professional ethics courses I have begun to employ a combination of cooperative learning techniques and critical thinking skills instruction, along with the aforementioned focus on students’ cultural identities as a learning tool. In particular, this pedagogical approach utilizes the following:
1. cooperative learning base groups which keep the same three students together throughout the semester for in-class assignments and group presentations;

2. critical thinking instruction, over the course of several weeks, which focuses on decision making and moral reasoning based on the best available evidence;

3. a focus on students' understanding of and identification with the norms of different cultures to illustrate some of the problems of moral relativism and move beyond them; and

4. a discussion of numerous moral theories, ethical principles, and case studies in professional ethics.

I believe #4 is self-explanatory, although not completely noncontentious, and #3 has been discussed at length in the previous section. Regarding #2, I have found that for most of my students, professional ethics is the only philosophy class they will ever take. As such, I believe that it is crucial for them to have some training in critical thinking skills before I require that they use such skills in assessing ethical case studies. Roughly, the semester is structured in thirds with the first third devoted to logic and critical thinking, the second to ethical theories, and the last to case studies and moral decision making. As I have organized the course around the goal of instructing students to make reasoned ethical decisions in their future professions, decisions based on the careful consideration of the best available evidence, it is prudent to begin the semester with a discussion of how to make decisions in general. The study of and practice in evaluating arguments and evidence via critical thinking and logic is the best way I know of to achieve this goal.

I have discovered that students are also better able to address the issue of moral relativism in particular after critical thinking instruction. Such instruction allows them to carefully evaluate the arguments for and against various relativist positions and arguments and more fully understand the problematic implications of these moral relativist positions. And I have noticed that a careful evaluation of the arguments on both sides of the moral relativism issue has led to fewer students espousing simple relativist views at the end of the semester.

Returning to #1 above, components of cooperative learning techniques seem to work well in instruction in professional ethics courses. As a significant component of this pedagogical approach, I have found that punctuating my lectures with both small base group discussions and informal learning groups has been a very valuable technique. While I will
not pretend to be an expert on cooperative learning, I have attended numerous workshops on different cooperative learning techniques and have used enough of these techniques to recognize their efficacy in the classroom, especially for my stated goals of overcoming students’ moral relativist views and preparing students to make ethical decisions in their future professional lives.

I know there is a significant body of literature which addresses the benefits and drawbacks of cooperative learning, so instead I will briefly discuss my own experiences with cooperative learning techniques, utilizing base groups in particular. In using base groups in professional ethics courses, I have found that my students are more comfortable with expressing their views, especially their critical evaluation of ethical theories and moral arguments. Like many problem topics, open discussion of moral relativism should lead to exposing its weaknesses, which lessens its impact on my students’ views about ethical theories and allows them to broaden their own perspectives. But such success is not without drawbacks. While I found there to be a noticeable increase in the depth of student understanding on the issues and topics which they address in their base groups, a serious negative consequence of this approach is the decrease in the breadth of topics that can be covered in a semester. As it turns out, even though cooperative learning techniques are overall beneficial, time constraints are clearly more of a problem with this approach than without it. However, the beneficial consequences of increased student comprehension and engagement with the material have outweighed the negative aspects, in my experience.

In the end, I have decided to retain these four elements in my classes as I have seen indications that they are effective for my students. Through discussion in base groups, critical thinking training, and focusing on cultural identity, I believe I have made the transition to discussion of ethical theory less hampered by the threat of students’ perceptions of moral relativism. In the future, I hope to offer learning community classes with professors from other disciplines relevant to the future professions of my ethics students. I expect that such collaborations will be beneficial to student success in many ways and that, in particular, it will be useful for addressing the problem of moral relativism and the sometimes troubling consequence that students see ethics as something quite separate from their professional lives.

I admit to proposing the discussed combination of pedagogical approaches more as a starting point than as a conclusion. I hope to stimulate a dialogue on the actual use of such techniques in professional eth-
ics courses which can help me choose the best direction to take in steering my students towards the goal of equipping them with the tools they will need for making informed ethical decisions in their future professional lives.

NOTES

1 Of course these claims exemplify different types of relativist views. I will argue that both moral subjectivism and cultural relativism are problematic for teaching professional ethics. This distinction between types of moral relativism will be made more explicit in the succeeding sections.


3 These are the two primary versions of moral relativism I have encountered in professional ethics courses and, I suspect, they are ones most commonly espoused by ethics students in general.

4 I will avoid the objection that I imagine could be raised here against utilizing a kind of moral delineation that may itself be morally problematic. It may indeed be a moral problem that we tend to offer greater moral consideration to those most like us rather than abstract away from such differences in moral decision making. In my experience, however, most students do draw such lines and so capitalizing on this to achieve the stated goals is at least instrumentally beneficial.